

Mr. Casper
SECRET

16 September 1965

MEMORANDUM FOR: Chief, Far East Staff
Office of National Estimates

SUBJECT : Domestic Attitudes Affecting the GVN's
Position on Negotiations

1. Any realistic appraisal of Vietnamese attitudes affecting the GVN's position on negotiations must recognize that to virtually all politically influential non-Communist Vietnamese in South Vietnam, "negotiation" is a thinly-veiled euphemism for "surrender" and US efforts to move down "the negotiation track" generate (in almost Pavlovian fashion) fears of a sell-out in which the Communists' Vietnamese opponents will be left at their enemies' mercy. Unlike many Americans, the Vietnamese have memories which extend for more than a decade. Their views on the prospect of negotiations in 1965 are shaped by what they saw happen in 1954. In Vietnamese eyes, the negotiations leading to the 1954 Geneva Accords were a successful Communist political tactic which got the French out of Vietnam (via commitments the Communists had no intention of honoring) but posed no serious bar to continuation of the Communist drive for political domination over the whole country. During the Geneva discussions, the views, feelings, and aspirations of anti-Communist Vietnamese were cavalierly disregarded or ignored by the negotiating powers. The individual responsible for voicing these views and personally required to bear the indignities involved was Tran Van Do, principal representative at Geneva of the Associated State of Vietnam in 1954 and now the present GVN's Foreign Minister.

2. Local attitudes toward the whole subject of negotiations are shaped by regional factors and functional responsibilities. The majority of ethnic northerners now in South Vietnam are there because they fled in 1954 to avoid coming under Communist control. Many see themselves as having nowhere else to go. Hence their actions, should negotiations again seem imminent, could be those of desperation and not shaped by what we would call rational logic. Centristes (particularly those from south of the 17th Parallel) and ethnic southerners have less prime facie grounds for fearing Communist domination, but even in these groups persons who have been active in opposing the Communists will feel a sense of desperation if they think arrangements are in prospect which will permit the Communists to come to power.

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3. Functionally, the most adamant opposition to negotiations will almost certainly come from the Army. Here there is unlikely to be much middle ground. Officers who remain steadfast will almost certainly attempt to sabotage negotiation proposals and to prevent the GVN from cooperating with the US in this regard. A few, if faced with the prospect of early negotiations, will probably consider the game lost and decide that they have no alternative but to make their own personal arrangements with the enemy.

4. Among the religious groups, Catholics probably feel they have the most to lose from Communist domination and almost certainly will take the most active role opposing any near term political settlement of the war. This will be particularly true in the case of the northern refugee Catholics, who are generally more militant and better organized than their southern co-religionists. The Buddhist position is more ambivalent, partly because there is really no single "Buddhist" position. Instead, one must consider the individual positions of various influential Buddhist leaders. Opposition to the idea of negotiation at the present time runs very strong among the more influential bonzes. Tri Quang, though he professes a desire for eventual peace, has taken great pains to explain to a number of American officials (including the undersigned) that negotiations are a political trap which must be avoided since under present circumstances they could only benefit the Communists. Tan Chau has been less outspoken, but even he has a sense of realism about Communist methods and practices which many American proponents of an early conference seem to lack.

5. In the political field, the VNQDD has waged a war to the knife with the Indo-Chinese Communist Party for about 30 years; the Dai Viets, for more than 20. Despite the fact that both of these parties are splintered into contending factions, VNQDD and Dai Viet sentiments will probably be as strong as those of the northern Catholics (many of whom, of course, belong to one or the other of these two political groups).

6. At all levels of politically articulate Vietnamese society, attitudes toward negotiations are influenced by historical memories, visceral emotions, and concern over such basic matters as physical survival. Consequently we cannot expect any aspect of this problem to look the same to Vietnamese as it might through American eyes. Discounting those who would privately switch to the Communist side (a group which the prospect of early negotiations might significantly increase), I believe that virtually all politically influential segments of Vietnamese society are already nervous on this topic, mistrust US motives and intentions, and would react violently should a conference become imminent. At best, the present military regime will be uncooperative with respect to any US efforts to arrange a conference in the near future. The Army would be unlikely to tolerate any successor government which adopted a more pliable position.

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7. The key point in all this business is one of timing. Many Vietnamese are undoubtedly sick of war and anxious for peace. Few with present political influence in South Vietnam, however, have any illusions about what a Communist-dominated "peace" would mean for them. Despite recent military improvements (due largely to the quantum increase in US involvement), most politically influential Viets are still inclined to think that any negotiated settlement effected in the near future will inevitably result in Communist domination. This attitude may change in time; but until it does, such Vietnamese will almost certainly regard negotiations as a menace to their personal safety and that of their families and a threat to everything for which they have been struggling since 1954. This assessment of the likely consequences of a negotiated settlement, in turn, will influence the personal and political actions of the Vietnamese who subscribe to it.

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